Providence and the Butler

By P. G. WODEHOUSE

"HIS Lordship wishes to see you, Mr. Keeling."

Keeling, butler to the Earl of Drexdale, rose slowly from the chair in which he had been enjoying his afternoon sleep, and toddled off down the passage. The footman who had brought the message watched him pass through the red-barge door which marked the boundary of the servants' quarters.

"Jane," he said to one of the housemaids, who had appeared from nowhere, "'ow old is old Keeling?"

"Blessed if I know," said Jane. "I've been here since I was a little bit of a slip of a thing, and he was just the same then."

"Poor old feller," said the footman.

"Why poor old feller?"

"'Cos he's got to go and see his lordship."

"Is his lordship in one of his moods, Tom?"

"His lordship," said Tom with emphasis, "is in about eighteen of 'em at once."

The guide-books were wont to assert that the most interesting sight to be seen at Drexdale Castle was the thirteenth century crypt. They were wrong. To the really thoughtful visitor the chief object of interest was Keeling. As a matter of fact Keeling looked a good deal older than the crypt. His air of antiquity and permanence was more marked. Nobody—not even James, the head gardener, who had been at the castle for twenty-five years, knew when he had first come to the place. When James was a sprightly young gardener's boy, Keeling had been exactly the same, so James asserted, as he was now. Keeling was not a mere butler. He was an heirloom, a part of the estate. It was believed that he knew more about the history of the Drexdale family than any-man living. It was his hobby. He worshipped the Drexdale blood. He knew the family history back to the days of Edward the Confessor. He dated events by the length of time that had elapsed since the present earl had fallen downstairs and sprained his ankle or the eleventh earl had fought furiously with his small brother in the stable loft over a disputed guinea-pig. The faithful old servant of the melodramas was a parvenu compared with Keeling. Footmen might come and footmen might go, but he went on forever.

"Master Jack--"Lord Drexdale started at the once familiar address. How many years had slipped by since Keeling had called him that?

Having negotiated the distance to his lordship's study at his best pace—for a summons to the presence in the afternoon meant that important matters were toward—Keeling tapped upon the door. A querulous bellow from within bade him enter.

John, twelfth Earl of Drexdale, was seated in an armchair by the window. He was a short, red-faced man, inclined to stoutness. He wore a ragged grey beard. Those who knew Keeling's devotion to the proud name of the Drexdales often wondered what his opinion of the present earl might be. Both as regarded manners and appearance Lord Drexdale would have made an excellent bookmaker or publican. In his youth his position and the blameless reputation of his father, a cabinet minister and a famous philanthropist, had led society to welcome him with a friendly smile. The friendly smile had changed to a blank stare within the space of four years, and now the best the society papers could find to call him was "that well known sporting peer." Which was a polite way of intimating that his friends and associates today were the scum of the race course.

BUT whatever Keeling's views may have been, he confided them to none. A Drexdale, however far he might have fallen from the Drexdale standard, was a sacred subject, immune from criticism.

"Come in, can't you? Shut the door. Don't stand there half in and half out, gaping at me like a fish. Ah!"

The last remark was elicited by a sudden twinge of pain in the foot which rested, swatned in bandages, on a pile of cushions, for his lordship was suffering from one of his frequent attacks of gout.

"Your lordship wished to see me?"

"Of course I wished to see you. For Heaven's sake, man, can't you close your mouth? Is it absolutely necessary for you to gape at me like that? That's better. Keeling, I want you to go up to London by the first train tomorrow."

"To London, your lordship?"

"Yes, to London. You've heard of the place, I suppose? Here, read this letter. This will explain. Curse the young fool, I might have known he would be making an idiot of himself if I left him out of my sight. Read it. It's from Colonel Brant, who was here for the shooting last year."

Keeling took the letter, and fumbled in his pocket for his spectacles, Lord Drexdale watching his manœuvres with growing impatience.

"Damn it, man," he broke out, "I can't wait all day. Give me the letter. I'll read it to you. It's about Lionel."

KEELING bowed. The Hon. Lionel, only son of the earl, was a pale, nervous young man who had been bullied through a sickly boyhood by his father and was now drifting aimlessly about London. Keeling, who had known him from his cradle, had an affection for him apart from the fact that he was a Drexdale. Lionel was quiet and diffident, and quietness and diffidence were a welcome change from the common run of manners at the castle.

"This is what he says," said Lord Drexdale, taking the letter. "I'll skip the enquiries after my gout. Here is the part I want you to hear. 'I think, if you feel well enough for the trip, I should run up to town for a day or two, if I were you. It might be just as well if you kept an eye on the hope of the Drexdale's just now. Last night, after we had dined together at the club, Lionel in a communicative mood, unbosomed himself to me. Not to break it gently, the young fool has fallen head over ears in love with a lady who, however attractive, is hardly in the rank of society, from which, I fancy, you would prefer the future Lady Drexdale to be drawn. To be exact, she is one of the performers in a sort of circus-spectacle which is now drawing the youth of the suburbs to Olympia. Lionel showed me her photograph. She seems to be deucedly good looking, and I gather from Lionel that she rides magnificently. If these qualities are all you demand from your daughter-in-law, well and good. If not, you'd better come and stop the thing. I can't help you. I sail tomorrow for Egypt. That is how the matter stands. The next move is with you. I hope your gout—' Oh, never mind my gout. That's all. And about enough. I can't stir myself, with this infernal gout, and you're the only man I can trust to look after the interests of the family. You may be a fool—don't gape, man!—but I know you've got our interests at heart."

"If I might suggest, your lordship—"

"Well?"

"Perhaps a telegram, directing Master Lionel to return—?"

Lord Drexdale jerked his head toward the table.

"Do you imagine I didn't think of that? I wired the moment I got this letter. There's his answer. He says he is very sorry, but he is in bed with a severe attack of tonsolitis, and his doctor forbids him to move. Tonsolitis! Bah! I expect he's sitting in the six-penny gallery, cracking nuts and making sheep's-eyes at the girl as she jumps through paper hoops."

Keeling received this vivid piece of imagery in respectful silence.

"Catch the first train tomorrow, Keeling. Do you see? Do you see, man? Very well. Do what you think best. Use your discretion, if you have any. If the girl has to be bought off, buy her off. Never mind the figure. That's all. I shall dine up here."

Keeling bowed, and left the room.

THE atmosphere at the castle was always a trifle electric on the occasions when his lordship had one of his attacks of gout, but the oldest inhabitant could not recall a more exciting hour than that which followed breakfast on the third day after Keeling's departure. It was his lordship's custom to read his "Sporting Life" (ne subscribed to the "Times," but he read the "Sporting Life") immediately after that meal. On this morning Tom, the footman, removing the breakfast things, was surprised to hear a sort of combination of roar and groan proceed from his lordship. Looking up, he saw that the latter's face was a rich purple, and that his eyes were bulging apoplectically. He was moving to offer assistance when the bulging eyes suddenly met his, and the earl, becoming aware of his presence, ordered him from the room with a stream of forceful words. Tom stood not upon the order of his going.

The paragraph which had disturbed his lordship so extremely was headed, "Interesting Wedding." And, in his lordship's opinion, that did not overstate the case. The paragraph ran as follows:

"A wedding of great interest to lovers of sport was solemnized yesterday at St. Andrew's church, Walthamstow, when the Hon. Lionel Carr, only son of the Earl of Drexdale, the well known sporting peer, was quietly married to Margaret, daughter of Nathaniel J. Trenton, of Austinville, Texas, U. S. A. Mr. Keeling, a friend of the bridegroom, acted as best man. The bride was given away by her father. Both Mr. Trenton and the Hon. Mrs. Carr are members of Colonel Wilberforce's 'Prairie Days' Company, now performing at Olympia, where the bride's wonderful feats in the saddle have been attracting so much attention. After the ceremony the happy pair left in an automobile for Wales, where the honeymoon will be spent."

At eleven o'clock precisely Lord Drexdale made a coherent remark—his first. That remark was, "When Keeling returns, send him to me."

In rehearsing scenes in our minds before they take place, we are apt to err chiefly as regards the attitude of the other party. We assign to him a certain deportment and allow our imaginations to run accordingly. Such scenes, as a rule, turn out otherwise than we have anticipated, owing to the other actor's independent treatment of his role. Lord Drexdale made this mistake. Even when he had a clear conscience Keeling's demeanor was wont to be humble. With this frightful burden on his soul, Lord Drexdale expected him to cringe. And he did not cringe.

The Keeling who entered the room at five-thirty that evening was subtly different from the Keeling who had left the castle three days before. His back seemed straighter. There was a curious light in his mild eye. Almost the light of battle. No good butler is ever perky. If he were perky, he would not be a good butler. But truth compels one to admit that Keeling, as he stood meeting the Basilick stare in his lordship's protruding eyes, came as near to being perky as it is possible for a good butler to come.

"Well?" said Lord Drexdale in a calm-before-the-storm voice, which might have occasioned the boldest a tremor.

"Your lordship has read the announcement?"

Lord Drexdale's feelings burst their dam. He spoke his mind. Years of acquaintance with turf circles had given him the power of expressing himself with a certain generous strength.

"You old fool!" he shouted. "You moth-eaten monument of imbecility. You stand there and calmly—You mummy! You dodderer! You—!"

"If your lordship—"

"What did you get out of it? What did they pay you Eh? No! You're too great a fool to be a